

ILONA BONIWELL ON FAMILY

As children get older, it can be tricky to get your family to bond and spend enough time together – but it can be done

“How do you create quality family time?”

When your kids are young, it's so easy to hang out together as a family. 'Let's go to the park!' you say. 'Yes, mummy!' 'How about going to Grandma's for lunch?' you ask. 'Hurray! When are we leaving?'

A trip to the zoo? You can keep a five-year-old on their best behaviour for a week just on the back of that promise.

Less than a decade later, things have changed a tad. 'Would you like to go for a walk with us?' Silence. 'How about going to Grandma's for lunch, she hasn't seen you in ages,' meets the response, 'Can't I just Skype her? This way I can keep it to 10 minutes'. Even a really generous, 'I can take you to Disneyland next weekend, fancy that?' is met with, 'How much spending money do I get?' I won't dare even mention the 'museum' word any more, and that's despite virtually having lived in the science and natural history museums almost every weekend for years when the kids were little.

It might have been something I have done dramatically wrong as a mother, but looking around, I discover I'm not alone. My friend, an executive trainer with two teenage daughters, says the only activity everyone in her house is genuinely happy to take a part in is watching a film. I wish it was that easy in our house. Although in theory watching a film is a 'yes' from everyone, in practice, it all depends on the film... My husband loves old French classic comedies and a bit of action; I am into romantic, foreign and historical cinema; while the teens have already finished watching all the new action movies by the time they come out on DVD, and are

only interested in 'modern' comedies (I'm trying very hard not to be judgemental here, hence the word 'idiotic' is not appearing in the last sentence). It's been at least three weeks since I bought *Jobs*, thinking it would have a unisex and inter-generational appeal, and I still can't convince anyone to watch it with me. Apple is old news for them, plus the guy is dead now, thus automatically history himself!

In the 2009 *Good Childhood* report for the Children's Society, authors Richard Layard and Judy Dunn state clearly that, compared to 50 years ago, children have a lot more money, leisure time and a completely different set of activities they can now enjoy (that can be summarised as MIG – mobiles, internet and games). 'The effect of all this,' they write, 'is a quite new youth culture, more separate than ever from the world of adults.' Oh dear, as I am writing this, I suddenly have this very painful realisation that I seem to have become the grown-up – this strange creature who feels uneasy about change and may start weeping over the good old days any minute now.

A playlist for family fun

A few years ago, I came across an exercise in the book *Quality Of Life Therapy* by Michael Frisch (see box, opposite) entitled 'Playlist', referring not to the latest tracks downloaded on your iPod, but fun activities you would like to do when you get a spare minute. Ideas on your Playlist may include visiting your favourite (or new) sections of a book, DVD, or music store, playing cards or board games, singing, dancing, going to botanical gardens, visiting a neighbour, sightseeing in the



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city, going to an antiques sale, doing woodwork, hiking, bird-watching, people-watching, bowling, DIY, baking, scrapbooking, looking at pictures and many others. These recreational outlets do not need to be cool, practical, either difficult or easy to do – they just need to be something you would enjoy doing.

I've decided to apply the same concept to my family, in a semi-official way, creating playful rituals and a list of planned activities, to be implemented when we have some time (and money) available. As *Psychology Today* author Elizabeth Elizardi points out, ongoing leisure time rituals or routines build family cohesion and communication, they require few resources, and are usually low-cost and accessible – a family dinner, board games, movie nights with popcorn, playing in the garden, dancing to music in the living room. On the other hand, novel leisure-time activities on the Playlist are out of the ordinary and less frequent – for example, family vacations, camping, fishing, special activities or outdoor festivals.

Going to the seaside is on the top of our family Playlist – we all enjoy swimming, body-boarding and sunbathing enormously. Theodore, who's nearly three, can't wait for the next family holiday – he is practising diving in the bath at every opportunity, but still has to wait a few months before going splashing in the sea. The second favourite family activity is playing board games; a couple of us (me included) are very competitive, so things can get quite heated. Cooking is probably the third favourite – everyone finds their own creativity in the process – followed by, well, the movie nights. If only I could convince them to watch *Jobs*... *Diana* might have to wait for my future daughters-in-law.

Read *Quality Of Life Therapy* by Michael Frisch (John Wiley & Sons, £52.50)

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